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# THE "THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS" AND THE "MORTE D'ARTHURE."

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THE fifteenth century saw the final redaction of two great cycles of romance—one in the East, the other in the West—one by an Arabian, the other by an Englishman—the "Thousand and One Nights" and the "Morte d'Arthure." In each of these we have finally gathered up, and placed in sequence and connection, a multitude of stories which had been floating down the ages; getting alterations, additions, and colorings as they came along. The experts in folk-lore can trace most of the Arabian tales to Persian and Indian sources; and more than mere germs of the Arthurian legends were current in Brittany and Wales centuries before Sir Thomas Malory published his fascinating book. Both these literary edifices, as we now behold them, bear evident marks of a single mind, of an editor who may fairly be styled an author. Who was the Oriental that put the "Nights" into their present state nobody knows. But to the Englishman, Walter Map, we ascribe with reasonable confidence the main construction of the homogeneous story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, while to Malory, of course, belongs its final shaping and polishing.

Nevertheless, both the "Arabian Nights" and the "Morte d'Arthure" are, in the deepest sense, the productions of a long period and a myriad people, not of an individual. They exhibit the habits, beliefs and desires of a society, rather than of some single man. Masson speaks of the contents of Malory's book as "a rolling body of British-Norman legend, a representative bequest into the British air and the air overhanging the English Channel, from the collective brain and imagination that had tenanted that region through a definite range of vanished centuries." So,

too, the "Arabian Nights" are the condensation of a pervading atmosphere, the crystallizing of popular notions and ideas.

It is this fact which gives each of these books so great importance in history and sociology and religion. Here is not the solitary conviction or aspiration of a lonely genius—who might be quite at outs with his generation—but the very thinking of the crowd. The life pictured in these stories is, on the whole, life as men then wanted it to be, and thought it might be, or at least had been in some more fortunate days. Here is life in the light of the accepted creeds and ethics of the community, in the light of the current religion with its blessings and its bans. Here is life as imagined, not by the occasional hero, or scholar, or saint, but by the rank and file. Here, to put it briefly, is the concrete illustration of what the Koran did for the civilization of one world and the New Testament for that of another.

A comparison of the two is immensely interesting. For each book is, as just intimated, pervaded by a religion and absolutely loyal to a faith. The Mahometans of the one and the Christians of the other have no misgivings as to their doctrine, no hesitancy in their worship, and no tolerance for heretics and doubters. They confess, they pray, they conform to ritual; and, when they transgress their code, they do so wittingly, aware that they sin, and sure that they shall be duly punished therefor.

To repeat: these two books stand for the ideals of their respective communities; for what the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of Mahomet felt and wished, long after the founders of their religion had passed away. In the "Arabian Nights" is a late Mahometan portraiture of life, not the mere rules of the Koran. In the "Morte d'Arthur" is a late Christian portraiture of life, not the mere precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. A comparison of the two is strictly fair. It is not setting an obscure book against a famous one, a dull book against a brilliant one. It is putting in contrast the folk-lore, the imaginings, the dreams, the desires of two epochs, as given in the distinctive, composite, dominant literature of each.

Magnificent, indeed, are the Thousand and One Nights! They flash with gold and diamonds; they resound with lutes and songs; they exhale cinnamon and attar-of-roses. The streets are crowded by picturesque figures with flowing robes and jewelled scimitars; beauteous faces lean from latticed windows; sly beg-

gars ply their amusing trade; opulent merchants recline amid their costly bales; steel clashes on steel; mystic bouquets of flowers convey amorous messages; long caravans advance laden with ivory and silk and spices and precious stones; and stately monarchs gaze down upon it all from their gorgeous thrones.

Here is the awful silence glaring from the desert strewn with bones; there the palm-trees overshadow the cool springs of the oasis; on beyond rise the glittering minarets of the city, with its winding streets, its thronged bazars and its houses, whose stern walls protect and hide delicious gardens. We meet sorcerers and jinns and ogres and monsters of every conceivable kind. For this bright, changeful life goes on in a region of magic, now kindly and now malefic. We ride, we sail, we traffic, we fight, we feast, we make love, we shout and sing. And, as a sort of unifying thread for the various tales of adventure and delight, there towers up the majestic figure of the Caliph Haroun Al Raschid, who wanders through and surveys the scene,

"His deep eye laughter-stirred  
With merriment of kingly pride,  
Sole star of all that place and time."

No wonder that children revel in these tales; that, amid the splendors and enchantments, they roam intent on the wealth of incident and furnishing, and never detect the underlying squalor and baseness.

But when we come to a scientific consideration of the quality, animus and direction of the characters in this glowing masquerade, it is quite another matter; the spectacle is sickening.

For, first, the "Nights" are thoroughly, unblushingly, callously sensual. As scholars know, it is impossible to translate them accurately in any edition meant for general reading. Their details would insure the prompt suppression of the publication and the prosecution of the publisher. Of course, one cannot give examples. Still, even in the expurgated copies of common handling the taint is detectable. But what Dean Church says of himself applies presumably to all children: "I am sure that I used as a boy read the old "Arabian Nights" without a suspicion of what is only too obvious to grown people, simply carried away by the excitement and wonder of the story." However, when we are estimating the civilization which made and liked a book, that

book must be contemplated as it was originally written and read, with all the filth clinging to its contents.

And, second, another thing which the children do not observe is the utter sordidness of these tales. Robert Louis Stevenson justly animadverts on "the rascality and cruelty of all the characters"; and the exceptions to his indictment are so scanty that it may stand in its wholesale denunciation. The lovers care simply for physical beauty. Everybody deems a full purse the insurer of felicity. Nobody makes a self-sacrifice for anybody else, except Azizah for her cousin Aziz; and that choice young scoundrel treats her with the vilest ingratitude. To hold steadfastly to the formulas given by the Prophet, to make the prescribed prayers and alms and lustrations, this is the sole conception of duty; and this mainly, if not only, because otherwise one will go to a very unpleasant material hell.

There is affection displayed by parents toward their children; but it is fitful, capricious, liable to gusts of unjust rage and even to lasting alienation. The boy or girl is prized chiefly as a reproduction and prolongation of self.

There are no magnificent aspirations, no heroic resolves. The men sometimes fight, but not as striving for a great cause; and they are never ready to die. Their sole aim is to have abundance of luscious food, gorgeous dress, flashing ornaments, obedient slaves and beautiful women, and to listen to gay music and wanton verses. "And so they abode enjoying the most comfortable life until they were visited by the terminator of delights and the separator of comrades, the destroyer of palaces and the replenisher of graves"—this is the orthodox formula for winding up a tale.

Then, third, is the brutality of the book. Men beat and kick unoffending women, and tell of it without shame. They lose faithful wives; and, after the first decorum of grief, they do not care. Take Sinbad the Sailor, as he would console his widowed neighbor, whose lamentations much surprise him: "Mourn not for thy wife; God will haply compensate thee by giving thee one better than she." And then Sinbad's horrified appreciation when he learns that the law of the land obliges the husband to be buried with his wife the day after her death, and his prompt solicitude as to the health of his own spouse! Take his murders in the burial cavern, and his robbery of corpses. He relates it all

himself without a qualm, or a suspicion that anybody who hears will feel one, as, indeed, nobody does.

The women are rather better than the men. In some instances, they show a real devotion which the sneaking objects of it do not deserve.

But, all in all, the "Arabian Nights" unroll a panorama of hateful and contemptible human beings. The jinns and afrites and so on—all doomed to damnation—are really finer than the men and women.

The charm of the book, for a mighty charm it has, lies—aside from its many humorous passages—in what takes hold of the children. It is the charm of cities of brass and castles of copper, of flying horses and gigantic birds, of valleys of diamonds, of gardens of gemmy roses, of fish who are men and horses who are women, of princes frozen into stone and princesses lying in enchanted sleep, of magic powders which create running brooks and columns of vapor which condense into dreadful demons.

Turn now to the "Morte d'Arthure." What a change!

Here are splendid groups, where "all the brothers are brave and all the sisters virtuous." Here is chivalric daring. Here is the steadfast seeking of a worthy quest. Here are souls which the bodies serve. Here is toil for toil's sake, and battle for battle's sake—or, rather, both for the sake of some unselfish yet all-repaying end. Here are stanch friendship and questionless loyalty and sacred love.

We ride through the lustrous woods with Sir Percivale, we greet the gaunt hermit at the wayside shrine with Sir Gawaine, we blow our defiant blasts with King Arthur before the towering walls of fortresses where abide the orgulous ruffians and robbers. We hear the trumpets sound at the lists, and we charge in pure joyance and strenuous combat, yet in full courtesy toward our equally courteous foe. We sit in goodly fellowship at the Round Table, which, unlike that of the ladies of Bagdad, is not laden with all cates and confectioneries; there are bread and meat and wine.

We join in the converse on noble deeds and curious haps and blessed miracles and generous devotions. We go forth seeking the Sangreal, conscious that only our sins can keep us from its blissful beholding. And when, finally, having splintered our last lance, and made our last shrift, and said our last prayer, we die,

the epitaph we crave and do somewhat deserve, is that which Sir Ector spoke over Sir Lancelot:

"There thou liest, thou were never matched of none earthly knights hands; and thou were the curtiest knight that ever beare shield; and thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrood horse, and thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman; and thou were the kindest man that ever strooke with sword; and thou were the goodliest person that ever came among presse of knights; and thou were the meekest man and the gentlest that ever eate in hall among ladies; and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortall foe that ever put speare in the rest."

There are villainies and debaucheries and cruelties in the "*Morte d'Arthure*"; but they always appear in recognized and declared blackness, as things to be avoided, scorned, loathed and crushed. When Roger Ascham petulantly denounced the book as one "the whole pleasure of which standeth in two special points, in open manslaughter and bold bawdrie," he uttered a tremendous slander, one which no wise man has ever since repeated. It is true that Sir Lancelot sins with Guinevere, and Sir Tristram—more excusably—with Isoude. But the sins are never condoned, and never go unpunished. They are seen, in the end, to have been the source of all the woe and overthrow which finally arrive; while, to offset such transgressing loves—which yet are loves, not lusts—we have the beautiful friendship of Sir Bors, the radiant purity of Sir Galahad, the sweet, simple, hopeless affection of the lily maid of Astolat; and scores more of men and women, gallant, generous, devout, living in a "pure religion breathing household laws."

The "*Morte d'Arthure*" has not, indeed, the full, linked, consistent teaching, the purposed allegory and undimmed splendor which Tennyson made out of its story, in his "*Idylls of the King*." But all the elements of that epic are in the old book—the sense of duty to be shown by acts of faith and courage, by endurance and purity and unselfishness, by compassion and self-control. Take the single episode, "How Sir Percivale's sister bled a dish full of blood for to heal a gentlewoman, whereof she died"—where is there anything like that in the "*Thousand and One Nights*"?

Yes, it would be hard to find two other books so alike in their origin—each a composite of myths and legends, each with

a strict theological creed, each with its Bible in the background and its Paradise ahead, yet so utterly unlike and repugnant in their contents. In the one, we enter a palace where fountains plash in the court, where the walls reek with glowing and erotic decoration, where wild music clangs and wilder dancers spin, where lavish banquets are spread on boards of onyx and malachite, where silk-clad men and women idle out the time with libidinous toying and coarse jest. In the other, we wander through the grave forest, where we meet, now a gladsome company who have been a-maying and return laden with blossoms, now a priest with solemn eyes bent upon his breviary, now a stalwart knight in full armor riding after some perilous but noble deed. And dominant over all is the stately figure of that Arthur, "*Flos Regum*," who, though not Tennyson's faultless man, is yet a King ruling for righteousness, for courage, for the love of God and Man.

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